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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAMAKO 000414

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SUBJECT: MALIAN MILLITARY CONVOY REPELS ATTACK BY BANDITS
NEAR TESSALIT

REF: BAMAKO 00305

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) On May 3 a group of armed bandits attacked a Malian military convoy destined for the northern Malian town of Tessalit. According to Malian military and international press reports, one Malian soldier and four Tuareg bandits were killed. Tuareg contacts, however, reported that no bandits were killed. Ibrahim Bahanga has denied any involvement in the attack. This denial, however, has not prevented the Malian and international press from implicating Bahanga and accusing him of having broken a quasi-cease-fire agreement with the Malian government.

2.(C) The military column, which was led by the ethnic-Arab Commandant Meloud Abdurahmane, continued on to Tessalit after the attack. The fact that the convoy reached its destination supports local reports that the attack was orchestrated not by Bahanga but the same band of local bandits that attacked the Malian military outpost in Aguelhok on March 26 (Ref A). Convoys attacked by Bahanga, who has extensive military training and firepower, have been either captured or destroyed. The largely unsuccessful March 26 and May 3 attacks, on the other hand, appear amateur in nature. Individuals likely connected to both attacks include the bandit/smuggler Merzouk ag Acherif, the mayor of Tessalit Abdullah ag Albacar and the former UN accountant Eghless ag Oufene.

3.(C) Comment: Restive Tuaregs with guns and a stake in the Sahara's lucrative illicit smuggling trade have always posed a threat to travelers, whether military or civilian, in northern Mali. While Bahanga may not have been behind this most recent attack, his actions over the past 6 months have clearly opened a window for other Tuareg bandits to attack military installations and convoys without fear of serious reprisal. As peace negotiations between Mali and Bahanga drag on, the likelihood of similar attacks by independent Tuareg rebels-in-training goes up.
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